

Alfred R. Bellinger

Religious Perspectives
of College Teaching
in the Classics

PA76
.B44



PA76

B44

RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES OF COLLEGE TEACHING

In The Classics

by

Alfred R. Bellinger

LIBRARY OF PRINCETON
FEB 22 1951
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES OF COLLEGE TEACHING

In The Classics

by

Alfred R. Bellinger

Professor of Latin, Yale University

THE EDWARD W. HAZEN FOUNDATION
400 Prospect Street
New Haven 11, Connecticut

PREFACE TO THE SERIES OF ESSAYS

Three years ago Professor George F. Thomas of Princeton University, in a letter to The Edward W. Hazen Foundation, urged the need for careful studies by natural scientists, social scientists, and humanistic scholars concerning the religious issues, implications and responsibilities involved in the teaching of their respective disciplines. This pamphlet is part of a series instituted by The Edward W. Hazen Foundation for the purpose of carrying Professor Thomas' suggestion into the sphere of fruitful inquiry and discussion. Under the sponsorship of The Foundation, the undersigned committee has enlisted the aid of distinguished scholars deeply interested in the relations between religion and higher education. Each of these scholars will discuss the problem in its specific pertinence to his own field of learning, his own conception of his intellectual and spiritual responsibilities to his students, to the institution which he serves, and to society in general. He will address himself primarily to fellow-teachers in his field, secondarily to students and to interested members of the educated public.

The committee responsible for the survey wishes to steer a course between two opposite dangers; that of a theological vagueness which would produce nothing but noncommittal generalities, and that of a dogmatism which would alienate all but a small number of readers. The views of the authors of these essays may vary from liberal to orthodox interpretations of religion. Throughout this diversity, however, runs a common denominator which is shared by the authors and by the members of the committee. Religion is not nature-worship, or man-worship, or science-worship. It is not the totality of human value. Although it is metaphysical, ethical, and humanitarian, it cannot be equated with metaphysics, or ethics, or humanitarianism. Religion is man's quest for communion with an ultimate spiritual reality completely independent of human desires and imaginings. Religion apprehends this Absolute Reality and Value in faith, and seeks to give concrete embodiment to the ineffable in creed, cult, and conduct. The creative power of the universe is not an intellectual abstraction but an objective entity, a Divine Being. Although God infinitely transcends our human nature and understanding, He most potently reveals Himself to those who conceive of Him in personal terms. Thus symbolized, He becomes

for us not merely Cosmic Mind, but Creator, Judge and Redeemer of mankind.

Within this broad but positive consensus the authors of these essays will exercise complete freedom in expressing their personal views. As regards the relevance of religion for higher education there is also general agreement among those associated with this survey. The cleavage which divides intellectual from spiritual life is probably the most ominous defect of modern civilization. "High religion and intellectual enterprise belong together," says Professor Robert L. Calhoun. "Each gains from close association with the other. The two in conjunction, but neither one by itself, can move with hope toward more effective conquest of the chaos that again and again threatens to engulf human living. That way lies whatever chance we may have for a more humane world."

In his essay *Colleges, Faculties and Religion*, appraising consultations with more than fifty faculties, Professor Albert C. Outler reports that "Education is by way of being reformed with little or no regard for the possible contribution of religion to its reformation. For a very tangled skein of reasons, it has come to pass that, in the name of tolerance and the democratic spirit, American educators (whatever their private beliefs and convictions) have in fact suppressed the consideration of the problems of the religious interpretation of reality and human existence in the educational process." He sees, however, evidence that religion will become increasingly influential in American higher education if it can receive "a fair hearing in the open forum of American academic discussion Where this is done, there is usually a vigorous and generally favorable reaction from both faculty and students."

To obtain such a "fair hearing" from a large academic audience is the purpose of these essays. Even in these days of "general education," however, the modern scholar remains a specialist. He is likely to be less interested in the general problem of the place of religion in higher education than in the specific problem of how religion pertains to the teaching of his particular subject. This more specialized aspect of the question deserves more careful investigation than it has hitherto received. At present, therefore, these essays are being published as separate pamphlets so that each may appeal directly to those concerned with the discipline which it discusses.

It is hoped, however, that the project may prove fruitful enough to justify later publication in a single volume or perhaps in three shorter books devoted respectively to the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities.

HOXIE N. FAIRCHILD, Chairman
BRUCE M. BIGELOW
ALBERT C. OUTLER
EDMUND W. SINNOTT
GEORGE F. THOMAS
ROBERT ULICH

Other Essays in This Series Now Available:

1. IN ENGLISH LITERATURE, by HOXIE N. FAIRCHILD.
2. IN HISTORY, by E. HARRIS HARBISON.
3. IN ECONOMICS, by KENNETH E. BOULDING.
4. IN PHILOSOPHY, by THEODORE M. GREENE.

Readers of this essay who wish additional copies for their colleagues or their graduate students should apply to THE EDWARD W. HAZEN FOUNDATION,
400 Prospect Street, New Haven 11, Connecticut.

PRINTED IN U.S.A. 

RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES IN THE CLASSICS

ALFRED R. BELLINGER

The oldest work of Greek literature begins with an address to a goddess. Back of the Iliad lies a long period of artistic development which is now lost, and it is clear that when Homer calls on the Muse to recount to him the tale of the wrath of Achilles he is following a convention already established. It is a mistake, however, to assume that a convention must be devoid of reality. Not only to Homer, but also to much later poets, the mysterious impulse and power which gives rise to the creation of works of art had in it something divine, which the artist could not but recognize as beyond himself. Centuries afterwards, Horace, intent on putting forth his most serious and profound beliefs, represents himself in the "national" odes of the third book as a priest of the Muses, and calls on Clio to assist him, just as Homer had called on the goddess whom he did not name. And Ovid, Horace's younger contemporary, a poet of a very different character, lays the poet's power to the god within us, a spirit from on high. Here and there in early Greek literature we can catch the echoes of a prehistoric period when poetry was *par excellence* the voice of wisdom, and when wisdom was the possession, by divine favor, of knowledge withheld from mortals in general. It is partly for this reason that the oracle at Delphi delivered the answers of Apollo, the great companion of the Muses, in verse throughout its long and influential history. The dependence of the poet on inspiration from above is one aspect of that acute awareness of man's relation to the divine which is a vital aspect of the great works of Greek literary art.

Homer's goddess has no name, but she is a person nonetheless, as are all his gods. Everyone has remarked how much like men and women are the denizens of Olympus. They are immortal and they are much more powerful, but otherwise there is little to choose. Indeed it may be said that the gods are neither so reasonable nor so moral as men. If they staunchly support one loyal worshiper, they are ready enough to abandon another. Their enmity is without pity and their vengeance exceeds justice. It is impossible to fit them into any consistent theological scheme, and their part in the cosmos is not by any means clear. Zeus is the father of gods and men, and at times it appears that the supreme power is his; at other times it

appears that he too is subservient to a Fate, most dimly suggested in the shadow behind the bright Olympians. It is obvious that these uncertainties and deficiencies do not trouble Homer at all. He is not writing cosmology but a story in which some of the characters are human and some divine. Both classes are portrayed by their acts. Neither class is analyzed or explained or accounted for. In both, the great virtue is power: Achilles is a hero because he is mighty, Odysseus, because he is astute. It is the success of the gods in turning human affairs to their liking that displays their divinity. Whether divinity was no more than that to Homer is an unanswerable question. In the creation of Hector he has given a wonderful suggestion that there may be human virtues independent of success and inassailable by defeat, but his tale has no place for a suffering or compassionate god, and we shall never know whether he conceived of such a thing. But, in spite of their inadequacy as embodiments of the divine, the gods of Homer have virtues of the greatest importance: they are real, they are interesting and they are very beautiful. Their reality must be apparent to any reader of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Chryses prays to Apollo in the assurance that he is addressing a person who can hear him and who will. Odysseus and Athena are companions. The gods are not forces or abstractions or symbols. They are individuals. As for their interest and their beauty, classical literature is full of it and would be impoverished without it.

When life is portrayed not as a tale but as a drama the result may be more profound, but the simplicity and freshness of the epic is gone. The gods of the Athenian tragedy are still real, still interesting and still beautiful, but they are no longer to be taken with the carefree delight with which one watches the angry Apollo striding down the ridges of Olympus. The problem of choice is essential to the drama, and if the gods are to participate in the situations they must be involved in the dilemma of destiny and free will. This dilemma Aeschylus faces courageously, relying not on any solution in detail, but on a basic faith in the cosmic plan which allows him to accept what he cannot explain. The problem of Orestes is one of the simplest and clearest of all tragic situations: he must avenge his father, whom his mother had killed, and he must not kill his mother. Action and inaction are both enjoined and both forbidden. He is not responsible for this situation, but

he alone can resolve it. But behind the conflict within him is a conflict among the gods themselves, not now, however, such conflict of pride and jealousy as had produced the enmity between the Homeric Hera and Aphrodite but a moral conflict between essentially different aspects of the problem. The Furies, whose specific function was the punishment of matricide, are opposed by Apollo, by whose command Orestes does the awful deed, and by whose counsel and support he is eventually purged of his guilt. The vital question is not whether the course he may choose is punishable, for that is certain, but whether it is expiable. Athena judges that it is, and the Furies themselves are eventually appeased. But to the question why a man should suffer for a situation not of his making no answer is given. Here, as in Homer, gods and men are alike, the gods immortal and more powerful but individuals still, and not omniscient, so that they grasp the cosmic whole only in part. Both gods and men, however, have undergone a great change since Homer's day, and now think more than they act. And the ultimate power behind Olympus is now much more clearly discernible as the figure of Justice. Whether this be Zeus himself or not, Aeschylus does not quite explain and evidently is not quite sure, but it is immanent and omnipotent, and its operations, while mysterious in detail, are right and sure in the end. Faith in ultimate justice redeems a universe in which the gods, though real, are many and therefore less than perfect; and where man is confronted by conditions that he cannot understand, not the least torturing of which is the power and the necessity of exercising his will.

Without the support of this faith the old gods may be a very perplexing element in the drama, as they are in Euripides. For him they are real enough; his plays are full of them and most frequently it is they who control the action. They are also interesting enough. They are individuals the best drawn of whom are quite as sharply differentiated as the human characters and scarcely less complicated in their actions and reactions. But their Homeric beauty is largely obscured by the emphasis laid upon their limitations. Their loves and hates are quite as trivial and unreasonable as in the epic, but the dramatist can no longer weave them unjustified into the texture of a decorative tale. He must consider them, and in so doing he is lost. He is not saved by the Aeschylean reliance on the final triumph of Good. In his view it is very often Evil that triumphs,

and that triumphs as the will of the gods. Yet he cannot dismiss them as wholly evil, as St. Augustine was to do in another age. Unhappily for his peace of mind their virtues are as real as their vices, and through the plays there is a pathetic return to the suggestion that there must be some mistake about man's conception of the gods, who cannot really be the imperfect creatures of the legends. No new conception is achieved, however, and to the end the only gods Euripides knows are those against whom he brings the final indictment that they are like men and that the likeness is unworthy of deity.

Of course, many currents beside the artistic had flowed between Homer and Euripides, of which the most important is the current of speculation. Philosophy hardly belongs to the history of Greek literature until its flowering in Plato, but much of Greek literature can only be imperfectly understood without taking account of philosophy. It was not in Greece proper, where the mountains and the thin soil and the laborious harvesting of the sea gave man little leisure from the business of living, that speculation began, but in the richer cities of Asia Minor and of South Italy. There men could pause, having gained some security in the struggle for existence, to contemplate the universe in the midst of which they had been set and seek to understand its plan and purpose. It was inevitable that the traditional gods should be subjected to the same kind of scrutiny that was applied to the physical world. Now scrutiny is just what the gods of Homer cannot bear. One may fear them and love them and believe in them but one cannot explain them. The attempt to include them in a consistent explanation of the cosmos is fatal. Doubtless the great mass of worshipers continued to believe and not to speculate at all, and we can see the effects of this conservatism in the Comedy of Athens. Aristophanes presents to his audiences a startling contrast of burlesque and reverence very hard for a descendant of the Judaic tradition to accept. How can that be worshiped which is ridiculous? Yet that is what Aristophanes shows us. In *The Frogs* the protagonist is an absurd caricature of Dionysus, the great god of wine, in whose honor all the plays at Athens were produced. There is nothing god-like or even respectable about him; he is simply a clown. Yet it would be a complete misunderstanding to suppose that the play is an assault on the established religion. Inserted into the middle of the farce, in the

very presence of the counterfeit Dionysus comes one of the most beautiful and sincere of all pieces of Greek religious poetry, a hymn to Dionysus himself and to his two companions, the goddesses of Eleusis. The confronted pictures are impossible to reconcile rationally. But that does not mean that they were impossible for the audience to accept. The preposterous Dionysus is really only an exaggerated relative of the lame Hephaestus of the Iliad, awkwardly serving the nectar while the gods laugh at his clumsy gait. The lameness, acquired when his father had tossed him out of heaven, will not bear consideration, but it is a part of him nonetheless, and if one is to believe in the Homeric Hephaestus one must accept him, limp and all. It is on this tolerance of irreconcilable elements of deity that Aristophanes relies, and it is evident that he did not overestimate the capacity of his audience to enjoy the incredible. In spite of all the penetrating thought which had been directed to cosmic problems, fifth century Athens was still full of people who could believe in defiance of reason. It would be a rash prophet who should say when some form of that capacity should cease to characterize man. There is no need to suppose that it was only the ignorant who enjoyed the comedy, however. The distinction between thinking and unthinking man is quite as much a difference of moods in one individual as a difference between one individual and another. Nothing that we know about Aristophanes himself suggests that he was a sceptic; his plays show clearly enough that he was no fool. Just what he believed it is impossible to say, but his belief certainly was not confined to systematic theology.

Literature in general reflects the thinking rather than the unthinking man, whether the distinction be specific or temporary, and to the former the Olympians clearly presented a problem. The easiest way out was to avoid it altogether by turning the attention to things human to the practical exclusion of things divine, which is the course taken with perfect propriety by much literature. It is essentially the course of Pindar, whose magnificent odes in praise of mortal victors are full of pious references to divine power in which the problem of divine personality is constantly evaded. It is really the course followed by Sophocles, a dramatist as reticent as Shakespeare in exposing his own convictions. Though continually treating of situations for which the gods are in fact responsible, he steadily focuses the interest of the audience on the reaction of the

human characters to those situations rather than on the divine machinery which produced them. Even in his last play, the *Oedipus at Colonus*, in which the ancient Oedipus, finally purged by his sufferings, is mysteriously translated, there is neither the Aeschylean vision of eternal justice, nor the Euripidean questioning of justice. It is a play about Oedipus, with the cause of his suffering and the reason for his reward both allowed to remain a mystery.

It is not surprising that the historians should have considered Man rather than God. Herodotus, recounting the great story of the wars of Greeks and Persians, certainly shows himself hospitable to the marvelous and particularly interested in the oracles which were so very important an element in the belief of his day. But aside from a conviction that Fortune, good or bad, is impermanent and that too great prosperity invites her envy, he can hardly be said to have any theory of the eternal scheme of things, and the actions and conditions of men so fascinate him that he has little attention left to give to gods. To Thucydides, more strictly an historian of war, the divine economy is still less pertinent and little is to be learned from his pages about ancient belief. In the same way the orators, while they pay the necessary conventional respect to orthodoxy, have their minds fixed on other things. But it is important to realize that there was an element of choice in this understandable characteristic of fifth century prose. The great sophist Protagoras coined the phrase "Man is the measure of all things," but he by no means invented the state of mind which the phrase expressed. The sophistic educational movement, whose least noble form was an unprincipled competition for success, was the counterpart of that public worship of power which forced the Greek states into and through the trials and the horrors of the Peloponnesian War. This was consistent enough with the splendid ritual which exalted the glory of the virgin goddess of the Acropolis, but it certainly ignored those difficult aspects of her being which were not satisfied by the conception of glory. The teachers and the statesmen of Athens could certainly not be classed as unthinking men, but they preferred to think of other things than the nature of the gods.

There were, on the other hand, those by whom the question could not be ignored. Full of a desire to find answers which should be eternal and complete, they looked upon the Homeric Pantheon and found it sadly insufficient. Of the thinkers to whom religion

was of primary concern, Socrates is the earliest of whom we have a clear picture. The work of his disciple Plato, that great artist through whom chiefly he is known to us, is the most fascinating and uplifting of ancient essays on the riddle of the cosmos. The vital but insoluble problem of disentangling the philosophy of the master from that of the pupil need not be dealt with here. The words are the words of Plato in whatever proportion he drew his wisdom from Socrates, Pythagoras or from others. His interest centers in ethics and politics, so that his theology is a secondary matter, but his conviction of the absolute reality of the virtues compelled an examination of the divine sanction of those virtues, and so of the nature of the gods themselves. It is of the first necessity for him that the divine should be perfect. With the gods of Homer, therefore, he deals in very summary fashion. Their shortcomings are too notorious to be forgiven or explained away. Since it is impossible to credit vices in divine persons, it follows that these are not real persons at all, but inventions of the poet. The poet's abilities, unfortunately, have given his slanders dangerously persuasive force, and since this is beyond the power of argument to overcome, the only escape is to abolish Homer and all the other poets who have represented the gods as less than they must be. So the Olympians, for their sins, are to be wiped out. It does not follow that the divine persons do not exist whom the poet's fancies have so distorted in man's view. Socrates has sent Xenophon to consult the oracle at Delphi; in his dying moments he reminded a friend that they owed a cock to Asclepius. Plato's system has place for more gods than one, and he may have felt that there was some residual reality back of the old names. But he never gives sound definitions to replace the abandoned ones, and in his pages the old gods do, in fact, disappear. What appears in their place is just what the Homeric theology most conspicuously lacked, an omnipotent figure, the cause and creator of all. The cosmology of the *Timaeus*, indeed, shows him assisted by lesser gods in the work of creation, but they are merely his agents. The power whom Aeschylus would not name is now portrayed as the vital element in the whole cosmic system.

In getting rid of the vices of the Homeric gods it must be confessed that Plato disposed of their virtues as well. Perfection and omnipotence are not easy things to make real to men, and one

wonders how many in the fourth century were able to approach the god of Plato with the assured worship with which the benighted warriors of the heroic age addressed Apollo and Poseidon. Plato's god was so very remote! And the intermediaries whom he supplied were not much help to the human spirit. It was exactly their appropriateness to the system which robbed them of that personality which man perpetually craves in the power he worships. Reaction against a system is an experience which has often occurred in religions including the Christian religion, and in spite of the nobility of Plato's system, its great advance over its predecessors and its great fruitfulness for the future, its theology could not possibly be considered as final. For one thing, Plato could not conceivably uproot Homer from the culture of his people; he himself must have been perfectly aware of that. If intelligent men were faced with the alternative of the *Iliad* or the *Republic* the great majority of them, then, as now, would certainly choose the former. Homer was a permanency, and his gods had the great advantage of familiarity. To be sure, they were as vulnerable as ever to scrutiny. Those late disciples whom we call the Neoplatonists, following the example of the Stoics in an attempt to rescue the father of literature without betraying their master, subjected Homer to an elaborate allegorical interpretation which is surely one of the great monstrosities in the history of literary criticism. One cannot believe that it ever affected men deeply. In spite of the sentimental associations that cling to the name of Hypatia, in spite of the undoubted power of mind of Plotinus, the real founder of Neoplatonism, its effect on literature, either in creation or interpretation, was trivial. The gods of Homer may never have fully recovered from the assault of the philosophers, but they surely had more vitality in their original form than in the abstractions to which the Neoplatonists would reduce them. The brilliant success with which they were revived in Latin form by Vergil testifies to a quality in them which lives on in defiance of the power of logic.

Nonetheless, the conception of a supreme and ultimate power, which was no invention of Plato's but which is essential to him, once having been advanced, could never be forgotten. It reappears as Aristotle's Unmoved Mover of all things, and as the Primordial Spirit of the Stoics, from which the world has its origin and to which it inevitably returns. It reappears in the form of the immut-

able physical laws which Democritus contributed to the Epicureans, that post-Platonic system which definitely endeavored to break the connection between god and man. Unlike the other philosophies of its age, Epicureanism produced a great work of art, the Latin didactic epic of Lucretius. In this the unworthiness of polytheism has produced not merely doubt but the most active hostility. To Lucretius superstition is the source of all evil, superstition being not belief in the gods, but belief that they have any concern for human affairs. The Epicureans by no means denied the existence of the gods, but they held them to be infinitely remote and wholly careless of humanity. They, like men, were products of nature, higher and happier products and so worthy of man's respectful admiration, but to be regarded with neither hope nor fear because they neither could or would have the least effect on man's destiny. Lucretius' poem is great largely because of the intense moral earnestness with which he urges on the reader the sin and folly of subordinating reason to superstition. For him the crimes committed in the name of religion are unrelieved by any virtues. The path of safety is to abandon all faith in the permanence of personality, human or divine, and adjust one's life to the serene processes of nature, obedience to which is man's happiness. It is a noble doctrine and an austere one, very far removed from the debased caricature which even in antiquity had preempted the title of Epicureanism. But its expression is not without its paradoxes. If one reason why the poem is great is that Lucretius is a great moralist, a more important reason is that he is a great poet, and poetry cannot be the wholly consistent servant of any system. He was sensitive to impulses and emotions hardly to be explained by atoms and the void. The very passage in which he decries the fear of death is too expressive of that fear to be a proper example of the calm which is the chief virtue of the Epicureans. The splendid opening address to Venus may indeed be explained since Venus is a mere personification of the force of nature, but in a system devoted to the exaltation of law, what need should there be of personification at all except that personality is the hardest of all things to exclude from the human consciousness?

Though Lucretius is quite without parallel in Latin literature, in one sense he is typical enough: all the Latin theological speculation is borrowed from the Greek. There are, to be sure, native elements

which appear here and there in writers of the *Republic* and thereafter, reflections of the old local gods of the Romans, very tenacious of their privileges, and some, such as the gods of the household, very charming, but accepted throughout their long existence with little or no real thought as to their nature. The more important and official gods such as Jupiter, Juno and Minerva, were early assimilated to their Greek counterparts. They always retained certain thoroughly Roman characteristics, particularly in the ritual of worship, but these were of a kind far removed from the inspired imagination of the Greeks. The Roman's dealing with his god was essentially a contractual matter. Gifts, sacrifices and temples were for value received or in the lively hope of favors to come. The whole complex of native Roman worship is of great interest to the student of human customs, but has very little to contribute to the experience of the human soul. When a Roman devotes serious attention to the nature of the gods he is certainly indebted to a foreign culture. It is hardly necessary to cite Cicero's essay on that subject, for it is frankly a translation and adaptation of Greek Epicurean and Stoic works to display their lines of reasoning, not to contribute anything essential to theology. But such a phenomenon as the great description of the festival of Isis with which Apuleius closes the *Golden Ass* is Latin only by accident. The power of it is purely oriental.

For the most part we have merely a translation of Greek mythology pressed into the service of the conquerors of the Greeks. The decorative value of the old gods is inexhaustible. It can produce the hymn to Diana of Catullus, who is not a religious poet at all, and the delightful *jeu d'esprit* on Mercury by Horace, whose religion was certainly conventional and unimpassioned. The old gods might be used in new ways for the glory of Rome, as they were by the inclusive genius of Vergil, or they might be combined in a wholly mythological work, as in the remarkable *Metamorphoses* of Ovid. But one who regards that *tour de force* in comparison with the Greek matter from which it is fashioned will see that it is the interest and the beauty of the old gods that has been preserved in this synthesis rather than their reality. If the mode of combination has avoided the difficulties of a strictly logical system which extinguishes personality, it has not cured the evils of divine imperfection and it has not succeeded in reproducing the vigor and freshness of

its ancient sources. It must be confessed that in Roman hands the Olympians shrink away until they become no more than part of the rhetorician's stock in trade, with which a witless flatterer might embellish a panegyric addressed even to so Christian an emperor as Theodosius, in conformity with a convention tolerated because the life was gone from it.

Yet the Romans would have been shocked to be called an irreligious race. For them, religion was not so much the contemplation of gods as the right understanding of the duty of man. They certainly did not invent ethics, and their best ethical writings are pale things beside the profundity of Plato and Aristotle. But the question of duty does pervade Latin literature to a much greater extent than it does Greek. As a late writer remarks, "those are religious who distinguish between what ought to be done and what ought to be avoided." The end of man, so stated, might have been perfectly acceptable to the Epicureans, though they would certainly have rejected the adjective "religious." But the private virtue of the Epicureans was far less admirable to the Romans than the public virtue of the Stoics, whose respect for society perfectly fitted their reverence for the republic, and whose ethics came as near as anything to expressing the Roman religion in the Roman sense. This theme of the duty of man to man and of man to the community of men fills with its diverse forms the pages of authors otherwise totally unlike: Cicero and Caesar, Livy, Sallust and Tacitus, Horace and Juvenal, Seneca and Quintilian. In the elegiac poets it is reduced or perverted almost beyond recognition, but in Vergil it rises to be the guiding principle of a great epic. Aeneas is pious not from any capacity for adoration, but because he is constantly faithful to his obligation. Of course, duty to the gods generally goes hand in hand with duty to men, but it is the lesser element. A work such as the *Pervigilium Veneris* in which worship is independent and not the handmaid of ethics is at once recognizable as foreign to the norm of Latin literature. A conception of religion so restricted would satisfy neither Aeschylus nor St. Paul, but it did give a sound, firm core to the Roman spiritual experience.

But what of the destiny of man? What had he to hope from duty well done or to fear from duty neglected? In most of the ancient mythologies, very little. The underworld in the *Odyssey* is a wan place, inhabited by bloodless spirits. It is not a place of punishment

—torment is reserved for a small group of sinners guilty of violence against divinity—but it is a place of bare existence. This kind of continuance, in which the dead are merely ghosts, is common enough in primitive religions, and the conception persists half submerged beneath much more highly developed faiths.

But man's persistent curiosity about an after life and his strong hope for the continuity of personality could not leave the question to unimaginative superstition. Early philosophers gave logical or mystical forms to his aspirations, most brilliantly in the myths with which Plato, having exhausted the resources of the language of reason, suggests the final truths which he apprehended beyond reason's horizon. Belief in immortality gave confidence to Socrates' last hours, though he may not have been the author of the logical proofs which Plato puts in his mouth, or have elaborated his faith into the picture of the divine judgment of souls and their courses of relapse, return and rise which he is made to expound. At all events, it was a courageous faith, fit to enable a man to bear with calmness unmerited death. Moreover, it would seem to have been a faith available to all. The mystery religions had long before introduced the idea of immortality for the elect, and as paganism grew old, more and more mysteries competed for the attention of the believers, but for the uninitiated there was nothing. The Stoicks came to preach a very exclusive conception of salvation: salvation for the eminent benefactors of mankind. Hercules and Aesculapius, Romulus and Scipio might go to heaven as a reward for their labors and their great deeds, but no such prospect was offered to the common man. Socrates claimed no such eminence, nor was his faith based merely on ceremonial purification. Rather, it was that of a man who had loved virtue and tried to practice it, and who faced death without fear, in the belief that the soul was by nature good and could not die. Posterity by no means always shared his hope. The Epicureans rejected it absolutely on principle. It was too simple for some and too high for others. The perpetual night which Catullus faced must have been reality to very many of those who had the courage to find out what they did believe. But now and again the hope appears in later literature, never more beautifully than in Vergil. His picture of the underworld owed much to Plato and to others, but it is a picture which impresses one as essentially the poet's own. Moreover, there is an apocalyptic element in Vergil

which he does not borrow. The Fourth Eclogue, that perpetual enigma, speaks of a new earth in the tones of Isaiah, and explains at once why Christianity took him easily to its heart and why he became the guide of Dante. The Golden Age for which he looked never came to pass, but it has been an inspiration to all since his time who have looked forward to the felicity of the world made anew.

If Vergil slipped easily into the Christian tradition, the same cannot be said of classical writers in general. The complicated and contradictory experiments in spiritual experience embodied in the Greek and Latin writers were an essential part of the world into which Christianity moved when the Gospel had been extended from the Jews to the Gentiles. Much of its character—its inventiveness, its beauty and its humor—was immaterial to those absorbed in the wonder of a new revelation. As long as the old gods were alive they must be regarded as foes and rivals, and how was classic literature to survive if its gods were rejected? Attempts at compromise were made, but they were poor things. One of the most disappointing of essays is that of St. Basil on the proper use of pagan literature. His doctrine is that the old writers are to be used when they exhort to virtue but to be rejected when they praise false gods. The *Iliad*, of all things, is selected as the great instance of virtue glorified, but how is one to read the *Iliad* and not see Olympus? Much more worthy of respect is the uncompromising vigor of Tertullian, who will not admit the possibility of reconciliation between the old order and the new, or for that matter, between reason and faith. If he had been as great an artist as he was courageous a spirit a new literature might have begun with him which should have challenged the old on its own ground. But that was not to be, and the two languages, the Christian and pagan, remained in large part incommensurable. Only as the rivalry subsided and the establishment of the new faith enabled it to be indulgent of the old order did the antique grace begin to clothe the thoughts of the Christians and some of the classic writers begin to be received back into the libraries of the devout. Much was laid aside through the dark ages and much was lost, but when the great intellectual awakening of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries burst the bounds of mediaevalism, a Christianity whose ancient

rivals were dead welcomed the literature of those rivals as an essential part of the spiritual as well as the artistic heritage of the western world.

Yet the religion of the pagan writers can hardly be said to have won from the normal classicist more than the tolerance of inattention. Of course there are those who study ancient religion as a specialty. But I am speaking of the average student or teacher of the classics. He is much more likely to give respectful thought to the syntax, the rhythm, the history, the fallibilities of his author than to his author's estimate of the divine. It is perhaps not surprising that this should be so. No modern teacher feels the need of confuting pagan theology. On the other hand, a healthy mind rejects the vapid, sentimental syncretism which seeks to establish the likeness of alien religious generations by pretending away their differences. Antiquity itself has supplied deterrent examples. The Sun-worship of the third century after Christ was designed to be all-inclusive, but it was never great, it was only big, and to bigness it sacrificed depth and significance. Nothing was accomplished by trying to identify unlike gods except to obliterate the individuality of them all. If, then, the modern scholar is disinclined to combat Apollo and unable to worship him, he easily solves the dilemma by ignoring him. Thereby much that is useful and illuminating is passed by. The explorations of the human spirit in the realm of theology are as worthy of study as those in the realm of art, and the attentive reader will discover some problems, and some attempted answers whose interest has by no means been exhausted.

There is, for example, the whole body of mysticism. The endeavor to reach the eternal by extra-rational means is very ancient, indeed it may almost be said to antedate the use of reason in religion, and, as already mentioned, it persists through periods of the greatest brilliance in the development of reason. It is an acknowledgment of the limitations of reason, and an affirmation of faith in realities to which there are no limits. It has many forms and many functions. At times it does no more than profer an escape from a world of actuality which has ceased to make sense. This may result in an other worldliness as simple as early monasticism, or it may be elaborated into an organism as complex as that of the library of Coptic Gnostic literature just discovered in Egypt, or the intellectual Neo-Platonism, which both attempt to invent a com-

plete new world to take the place of the familiar world of error and frustration. The worshiper at Eleusis could console himself by a faith in mystic reality for the inequities and disappointments of life, and little as we know directly of the mysteries of Eleusis, they were certainly a powerful influence on some of the finest of ancient minds. To great minds mysticism has again and again afforded not escape but independence of actuality—a very different thing. For though mysticism may tempt a man to abandon his mortal function, it may also strengthen him to transcend that function and to live simultaneously the life temporal and the life eternal. Both extremes may be found in the Greek and Latin authors, as both may be observed in contemporary theology.

Again, there is the attempt, nobly illustrated in Aristotle, to push the use of reason to the very bounds of the universe. To Aristotle, as to many modern scientists, the suggestion of limitations to reason would have been disgraceful. It is interesting to watch Aristotle's cautious and tentative approach to the divine. When he is writing of ethics, where the values are relative, his system can be constructed almost wholly without appeal to divinity. When he is writing of physics and metaphysics, however, where the values are absolute, he cannot dispense with divinity in the end and not only the Unmoved Mover, but the heavenly bodies also are acknowledged to be divine, though the only authority to which he can appeal is ancient wisdom. This closer link between religion and physics than between ethics and religion is a phenomenon on which this generation could meditate with profit.

Such capital questions and very many lesser ones are to be encountered in the pages of the classics, and it is superficial to ignore them. Nothing is more necessary for the classics than to be brought back into the main stream of the humanistic discipline and studied no longer merely as an aristocratic division of learning, but as a brilliant part of the whole history of mankind. For that purpose we must study them anew, entire and no longer be misled by the false doctrine that what the ancients knew is important but what they believed is negligible. What men believe is always important and no conception of the relation between a man and his god is without significance for the great question of the true relation between God and man.

**PHOTOMOUNT
PAMPHLET BINDER**

Manufactured by
GAYLORD BROS. Inc.
Syracuse, N. Y.
Stockton, Calif.

Date Due

21332

800-234-1780



PA76 .B44
Religious perspectives of college

Princeton Theological Seminary-Speer Library



1 1012 00143 1594